90% of Hispanic Parents Shared Frequent Meals With Their Children

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Family dinners have long been considered a healthy tradition and new U.S. Census Bureau data show that Hispanic and immigrant parents are more likely than their non-Hispanic and native-born counterparts to follow the cherished ritual.

As the nation celebrates Hispanic Heritage Month, we show trends in parental involvement among Hispanic families.

Frequent family meals have been linked with many positive youth outcomes including healthy weight, improved school-performance and fewer risky behaviors (like alcohol or tobacco consumption), in addition to improved family functioning.

Mealtime can also serve as models of healthy eating, such as more fruits and vegetables, and open communication between family members potentially improving parent-child relationships.

Overall, U.S. parents have been highly engaged with children for decades. According to Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) data, more than four in five children ate dinner with their parent at least five days a week from 1998 to 2021. In fact, the proportion of parents who frequently had dinner with their children increased to 85% in 2020, most likely due to COVID-19 pandemic-related shutdowns and quarantines.

This article uses new data from the 2021 SIPP as well as from earlier years (2018-2020) to explore family interactions among two groups hit hard by the Covid-19 pandemic: Hispanic and immigrant populations.

Every year from 2018 to 2021, a higher proportion of Hispanic parents had frequent dinners with their children than their non-Hispanic counterparts.

The SIPP asks only one reference parent (usually the mother) to answer questions about parental involvement with children, even if the other parent is present. For purposes of this article, weighted estimates are at the reference-parent level although we use parent and reference parent interchangeably. The 2021 SIPP estimated number of reference parents in the United States was 38 million.

Hispanic Families and Shared Dinners

Family is a commonly held value among Hispanic groups which is often studied by the term *familismo*. Extensive research shows Hispanics have a strong commitment towards the collective over the individual. Examples include an emphasis on family closeness, respect for authority, geographic proximity, and valuing the nuclear and extended family. Frequently shared meals may be another sign of strong Hispanic family ties.

In 2018, 87% of Hispanic parents shared frequent meals with their children, compared with 83% of non-Hispanic parents and 84% of all parents (estimates for non-Hispanic and all parents were not statistically different from each other). Meals and dinners are used interchangeably in this story.

In fact, every year from 2018 to 2021, a higher proportion of Hispanic parents had frequent dinners with their children than their non-Hispanic counterparts.

Hispanic families faced common mealtime challenges such as busy work schedules and use of electronics like TVs and mobile phones. Also the COVID-19 pandemic took a toll on Hispanic families, who suffered job and wage losses and disproportionate rates of sickness and death. Despite these obstacles, however, Hispanic families continued to make time to share meals together.

In 2021, 90% of Hispanic parents shared frequent meals with their children, compared with 86% of non-Hispanic parents and 87% of all parents (non-Hispanic and all parents were not statistically different from each other).

In 2021, Hispanic parents made up almost a quarter (23%) of all reference parents.

As obesity rates continue to increase among the Hispanic population, the positive role of shared mealtimes is becoming increasingly important for children’s nutrition.

Immigrant Families and Dinnertime

When people leave their home country, they usually bring their traditions, values and beliefs to the places where they settle. Immigrant groups value family in distinct ways than native groups which may shape behaviors such as the frequency of shared mealtimes. SIPP data show that most immigrants have an established family routine of frequent shared meals that persisted through 2021 despite high rates of Covid-19 cases.

In 2021, 89% of foreign-born parents shared frequent meals with children compared with 86% of native-born parents and 87% of all parents (estimates for native-born and all parents were not statistically different from each other).

The pattern has been similar since 2018. A higher percentage of foreign-born parents (88%) than native-born parents (83%) shared frequent dinners with children, a gap of 5 percentage points.

Immigrant parents made up over a quarter (26%) of all reference parents in 2021.

What About Hispanic Immigrant Families?

Migration is central to the experiences of the Hispanic population in the United States. In 2018, people born in Latin America and the Caribbean made up half (50%) of the total foreign-born population in the United States.

The continued flow of these new arrivals has contributed to the growth of the Hispanic population, its connections to origin countries and the ongoing redefinition of Hispanic identity.

In 2021, Hispanic people accounted for 50% of immigrant reference parents. And among Hispanic parents, over half (57%) were foreign born. In other words, there was a significant overlap between the Hispanic and immigrant parenting communities.

Hispanic foreign-born parents also frequently had dinner with their children in 2021: 89% compared with 87% of all parents.

SIPP Topics

The SIPP collects information on child well-being, including details on parental involvement with children. As noted above, among other things it asks a reference parent (usually the mother) to identify the number of times in a typical week they had dinner with their children ages 0-17.

Five or more shared dinners in a week are considered frequent.

The following order is used to select an adult as the reference parent: biological mother; other mothers; biological father; other fathers; or the householder (if no parents live in the household). More information is available in the Child Care section of the SIPP User's Guide.

The SIPP also collects information on Hispanic origin and place of birth. Reference parents may self-identify as Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin. Foreign-born or immigrant reference parents are those born in a country other than the United States; native-born are those born in the United States.

All estimates shown are at the reference-parent level at the time of interview. Year-to-year comparisons are not statistically different for the Hispanic and immigrant populations.

Why use 2018-2021 SIPP?

Estimates for 2021 are of particular interest given that the SIPP interviews were held at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (February 2021-June 2021).

However, SIPP data from 2019, 2020 and 2021 were impacted by high nonresponse rates and non-response bias. High non-response means that many people who were asked to participate in the survey did not do so. Nonresponse bias means that the characteristics of those who responded to the survey were different than those who did not respond.

A consequence of these factors is that reference parent characteristics differed across years, which may have influenced parental involvement measures such as family dinner frequency. Including 2018 data in this story was crucial to establish a benchmark unaffected by data collection issues.

About the SIPP

The SIPP is a nationally representative, longitudinal survey administered by the Census Bureau that provides comprehensive information on the dynamics of income, employment, household composition and government program participation.

More information is available on the SIPP webpage. Technical documentation and more information about SIPP data quality are on the SIPP Technical Documentation webpage. The estimates presented here are subject to sampling and nonsampling error.

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